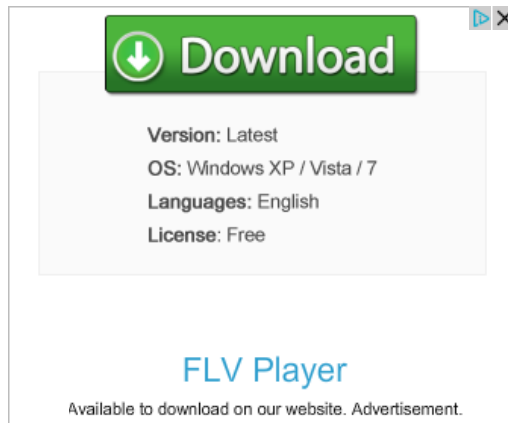


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## Feature: Look at the Burial rites for an Akwamu Chief



My colleague squeezes his face and forces out a smile as he reluctantly gulps down the sip of schnapps. His eyes catch mine as he opens them and I read his lips say, "Palm wine would have been better". I can't agree more. The [glass](#) passes on and I shudder my turn. The last time I tasted this thing, it was not very pleasant. You see, I come from a family of soft stomachs so sharp substances like this makes me visit the [toilet](#) a bit more often than usual. Intuitively I ask myself what sends me here and as if the linguist hears me, he quickly turns and mutters something in the local dialect that translates as, "if you are not too comfortable drinking it, you can pour it to the ground for the gods of our land..."

"Halleluyah!", I say to myself grabbing the glass with confidence and spilling the transparent thing all over the earth before me. The things tradition can make you drink in Ghana, you have no idea. But in this witnessed by instance, there's very little choice. We are in the Palace of the Akwamu-Aduana Atwea Abrade and tradition is being followed to the very last detail.

So we [waste](#) about the half the green bottle by 'giving the drink to the gods'. The linguist now welcomes us officially and starts to introduce us to the members of the traditional household. Midway through the introductions, a door bursts open behind the Regent of the stool of Atimpoku, Nana Darko Amerdi. A hush suddenly fills [the room](#) as Obaa Yaa Foriwaa, Obaapanyin of the stool enters looking rather hysterical and somewhat domineering. All the men including the linguist bowed their heads as if they didn't want to look at her. Fear grips us. Without any permits or warnings, she takes control of the premises controlling and commanding everyone including the Regent. She demands an extra bottle of Schnapps and this time insists that we all taste it as a gesture of our good intentions.

Charles, my colleague, who had tasted the thing earlier, raises his eyebrows as if he just heard the worst of news. "She must be joking" I say to myself. As for the rest of the members of the group, well, their confused facial expressions say it all, "Give us palm wine!"

Obaa Yaa Foriwaa grabs the green bottle and dashes out of the Kings' court into the main yard sprinkling the drink all over the palace. It is almost a fearful sight to behold as she looks and acts in a rather bizarre manner.

Looking on with our eyes wide open, Obaa Yaa now appears to calm down. The linguist now [leads](#) us to go round and greet all over again after which he explains that Obaa Yaa had been possessed by the gods. Now that makes things even more complicated. A whole number of questions run through my head. "What if the gods decide to strike one of us dead as a sacrifice?" "What if one of us got possessed?" Soon some relief comes our way as Obaa Yaa leaves us for the chambers.

The Akwamu-Aduana Atwea Abrade tradition requires at this stage that we declare our intentions officially. In other words, what brings us to the empire of the late Nana Baffour Akoto?

"Otwediampong Kwame.... Asaase Yaa!" Nana Nom Nsamanfour and a lot more. Words that depict true Ghanaian traditions and customs. Customs that make us unique and outstanding as Ghanaians. Indeed, Ghana is blessed with many rites, norms and rituals that come together to make our culture whole; from the birth of a [child](#), through puberty to the time of death. Rich traditions that are sadly losing their worth and significance for many reasons. It is some of these reasons that inspired this article and has brought us to the Royal [home](#) of the Akwamu-Aduana Atwea Abrade clan in the Atimpoku area of the Eastern Region of Ghana, to document traditions and customs surrounding the death of a Chief in this area.

The Okyeame reiterates our mission to the other elders present. Obaa Yaa Foriwaa joins us again. I sit up and identify the nearest exit, just in case the gods take over. You know, these days one can never be too careful. But this time round she's looking sweeter and a lot calmer. She takes a seat at the centre of the hall and greets us all over again. It appears she's herself now. The gods have left her alone. In fact, we will come to learn later that she's had no idea of her actions earlier. Those were the gods, not this beautiful woman in rich traditional kente. The celebrated tapestry of Ghana.

The Regent, Nana Darko Amerdi, in a rather informed and authoritative voice takes us through the step-by-step [procedure](#) leading to the burial of a Chief as custom demands.



So the Chief is dead. Regardless what kills him? But who told you? How in the name of the gods did you, an ordinary citizen get to know that the Chief has died? In the first place the expression DEAD cannot even be used in this instance anymore than an ordinary citizen can propagate the death of the Chief. The news is delivered as a need to know classified fact shared euphemistically among the most important people that need to know immediately. Nana makes it clear that the death of a Chief is kept absolutely secret until certain vital customary rites are performed. The first of this is known as "topresono".

This is a ceremony in which the body of the deceased Chief is taken into a dark room to be destooled. At present in this room are the Abusua Panyin, the Nana Hema, Abrewatia and the Chief linguist. The face of the deceased Chief is painted with ground charcoal, white clay and a special leaf, "odwen haban" placed in his mouth. He is then clad in his full war regalia wielding his "afena" - a special type of sword symbolizing his power and authority.

The Chief linguist now invokes the spirit of the deceased Chief as well as other gods and spirits of the land and accepts a bottle of Schnapps from the Nana Hema to offer libation that signifies the end of the deceased Chief's reign. They then undress the dead body and seize his "afena" from him. This ends the "topresono" rites making it possible for the death of the Chief to now be announced publicly.

Any announcement prior to the completion of the "topresono" is punishable by the fine of 7 live sheep, a crate of Schnapps and other products deemed appropriate by the authorities. At this point a member of the council of elders, Oheneba Kwaku Fori comes in quickly to mention that the penalty for premature announcing the death of Chief would be death in times past. But fortunately, times have changed.

Now the entire community is aware that the giant tree has fallen – the Chief is dead. This is only because immediately after the "topresono" ceremony, the "prempre" drums are beaten to signify the official declaration of the passing of the Chief. A mini durbar for the community also attended by other chiefs from far and nearby towns is held at which the Chief linguist formally announces the demise of the Chief using Euphemistic phrases like "Obrempong kese atutu, Nana ko ne kora" and the slaughter of 7 live sheep.

Official mourning now begins in the community and all nearby towns and villages and the hunt for heads also begins. Yes, the hunt for heads – human heads. According to Akwamu-Aduana Atwea Abrade traditions, the deceased Chief cannot cross-over to the land of the silent fathers alone. He must have company – servants who will attend to his needs in the afterlife and so heads of citizens, especially members of the Royal family are severed to accompany the late Chief on his journey. Excuse me; did you say something about human rights? I don't think so. This is tradition.

All this while the body is been embalmed with gold dust so that it does not go bad. The late chief is laid in state for a minimum of five days during which no economic or social activity takes place. The community does nothing but mourns, mourns and mourns.

For the people of Akwamu-Aduana Atwea Abrade, the death of a Chief is treated with all seriousness and attention. But the scariest and most intriguing part is the day of the burial. On this day the community comes to a complete standstill. "Even the leaves of trees dare not shake" as the Regent puts it. Burying the Chief is the sole responsibility of the "Abrafour", the executioners, and on this day no man, woman or child must be seen on the streets – at least not until the Chief is buried. Call it a curfew if you like, but the streets are must be absolutely empty. The Chief departs and the executioners are extremely possessed. So possessed that an executioner can kill his own mother, father, brother or child. But once buried, peace returns, a new Chief is installed and the final funeral rites are planned and executed and this could happen even a year after the death of the Akwamuhene whose Kingdom was sometime past one of the most powerful Kingdoms in Ghana.

It's been 14 years since the death of the last Akwamuhene, Nana Kwafu Akoto but conflicts within the Royal clans have made it impossible to install a new Akwamuhene. Today the throne remains vacant but the customs and traditions of this great people are still held in high esteem.

By kester aburam korankye



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